



Wild India

Black Bitterns and Blue Bulls

December 1st – 21st 2004

A Greentours Trip Report

Led by Phil Benstead and Chris Gardner

Daily Report by Phil Benstead

1st December

Travel to Delhi

Most of us flew together from London via Frankfurt, although Suzanne made the long journey from New York before joining us in Frankfurt and Chris and Jacqui went via Milan just to be different. After reclaiming our bags and changing money we met up with Vinod and got into the bus for the short ride to the Centaur and some much needed sleep.

2nd December

Delhi to Bharatpur

After a late breakfast (0830) we headed for the bus and began the drive to Bharatpur. It became apparent early on that we really were in India as we were engulfed in traffic of all descriptions and crawled through never-ending towns seething in people most of whom seemed to be selling white radishes. We all marveled at the levels of brinksmanship displayed by the driving techniques occurring all around us and were rather sobered up by the sight of a lifeless motorcyclist stretched out on the tarmac after a recent accident. During the drive we became familiar with many of the common roadside birds of this part of India catching fleeting glimpses of kingfishers, bee-eaters and our first cranes, storks and ibises. About halfway there were several pools covered in waders and we all managed to identify a few species – the most obvious being the black-winged stilt. We cracked on regardless though heading for our late lunch at the Bagh, snacking on lovely fresh bananas and tangerines as we traveled. We did make one stop for comfort reasons and another at the Kosi Canal to enjoy a large flock of spot-billed duck, black-headed ibis and a number of purple gallinules on a roadside pool.

Just before three we pulled into the Bagh and quickly sorted out the room allocations and headed straight for the restaurant for the first of many impressive meals – after eating more than enough we all staggered around the garden looking at some great birds including rufous treepie, Indian grey hornbill, lots of rose-ringed parakeets and some skulky *Phylloscopus* warblers including Hume's and greenish. Dusk fell all too rapidly leaving us to settle in to our comfortable rooms before heading to the bar for the checklists and dinner!

3rd December

Bharatpur (Sapan Mori and Temple area)

After an early breakfast we met up with Ansar and headed towards the reserve in the bus. We stopped briefly just outside the gates to visit the small park here which produced the usual roosting brown hawk owl and we watched it at close range for a short while before leaving it in peace. Next stop was just inside the park where we wandered into the scrub until Ansar located a dusky eagle-owl nest and we briefly watched a bird sitting low on the nest.

At the second gate inside the park we met up with our convoy of rickshaws and drivers and headed quickly to the nursery, which was a full of birds – a fruiting fig here held brown-headed barbet, coppersmith barbet, red-vented bulbul and Indian grey hornbill. A brief look for nightjars was unsuccessful. Moving on we headed further into the reserve by rickshaw and those of us that had visited the site before quickly realised that there was a severe shortage of water this year. Jheels that normally thronged with colonies of storks and herons were occupied instead by grazing cattle. During the whole day we did not see a single painted stork – an impossible concept for a day at Bharatpur during a normal winter. Taking a sidetrack we managed to find a splendid large-tailed nightjar and watched it at close range. Finding this cryptically plumaged bird was a challenge though as it blended in to the forest floor extremely well. Eventually we all got on it and the photographers had a pleasant time snapping away.

Ansar informed us that there was still some water down by the temple so we headed that way and started to bump into small numbers of birds and eventually got a reasonable introduction to the wetland birds of India and also found a number of good-looking butterflies. Lunch was delivered and served by staff from the Bagh and taken in the shade by the temple. Highlights in the wet bits included a fantastic pair of black-necked storks which we watched on and off as they first harassed a pelican and then ripped apart a dead coot; single white-eyed buzzard and imperial eagle, various obliging and stately sarus cranes and a 50+ flock of common crane.

Towards the end of the day we searched the drier areas for yellow-wattled lapwings but failed to find any birds (although we saw our first bay-backed shrike – a fine beast) and then it was time to rejoin our rickshaw drivers for the pedal back up to the bus and our short transfer back to the Bagh. At dusk the eerie wails of jackals could be heard all over the reserve. Back at the Bagh, once again the chef excelled himself and we ate another hearty Indian meal before heading for bed.

4th December

Bharatpur (Rambund and temple area)

Another early start for us all this morning, this time birding the area around Rambund (usually wet – in fact the area that we normally take boat rides around). Birding here produced a number of great birds including four species of woodpecker - an elusive wryneck, a diminutive brown-capped pygmy woodpecker, the spectacular black-rumped flameback and the yellow-crowned woodpecker. Near the reserve boundary we were shown a family party of spotted owlets that engaged the photographers attention as they sat photogenically in a huddle on a branch.

Moving along the bunds we bumped into a small bird party that included small minivets, Marshall's iora and common woodshrike, which melted away quickly. A nearby python lair failed to produce any pythons but a fresh track was evident and a number of shed skin remnants were picked up. The snakes share the burrows of porcupines and we also picked up a number of quills here. Nearby a dead cow attracted a number of crows and our first red-headed vulture. From here we wandered back down to the visitor centre and another splendid picnic laid out for us by the men from the Bagh.

After lunch we met up with our rickshaw team and headed down the main track hoping to find a black bittern. First though we stopped at a roost hole and the drivers showed us a splendid Indian scops owl peering bleary-eyed out at the world. Great little bird. At Sapan Mori we all got out and walked on towards the temple. Along the way we were treated to fantastic views of a pair of small Indian mongooses that had caught a snake.

Around the temple we had much better views of the two imperial eagles that we had seen earlier in the day, and managed to scare up a black bittern and Dorothy found a super water rail to add to our growing list. Down this end of the park there were noticeably more duck than yesterday including wigeon, garganey and lesser whistling duck, as well as large numbers of teal and pintail. As the sun dipped to the horizon we rejoined the rickshaws for the long pull out of the park. Dinner was as usual a sumptuous affair and afterwards we went to see another spotted owlet by the main gate.

5th December

Agra and the Yamuna River

Today we had a relaxed start and after breakfast headed for Agra in the bus. Along the way we were appalled to see at least 15 'dancing' sloth bears by the side of the road. As we drove we searched the cultivated fields for the increasingly scarce black ibis but failed to find any.

After an hour we arrived at the outskirts of Agra and started picking our way through the throngs of buses, cars, lorries, pedestrians and other road users. After picking up our guide Rajeev at the Taj View Hotel we headed straight for Agra Fort where we were treated to the full tour. Rajeev proved to be a mine of information although fortunately he seemed completely unaware of the existence of Chelsea Football Club. During the tour of the fort we all learnt a great deal about the Moghul era and from the ramparts we got our first view of the Taj. The fort was not without its

wildlife being the perfect habitat for the brown rock chat and amongst the many black kite and Egyptian vultures overhead we briefly spotted a pale phase booted eagle.

After the fort we split into two groups consisting of shoppers and birders. The birders headed for the River Yamuna below the fort and the rest went off to visit a marble factory and a handicraft shop. The birders saw a selection of great birds despite the less than salubrious surroundings including sand lark, Indian bush-lark and a variety of waders. The shoppers made various purchases and seemed to enjoy themselves. We all met up again and headed to the Trident and lunch.

After a splendid buffet lunch we headed for the high point of the day – the Taj Mahal. Even if you have been before the first real view of the place through the gate is an electric moment. Rajeev sat us all down and filled us in on the history of the place and exploded a few popular myths whilst he was at it. Then those that wished accompanied him inside whilst the birders gathered round the back (philistines all) and checked out the river hoping for a black-bellied tern (in vain although we enjoyed watching the hovering technique of the pied kingfisher). And so back to Bharatpur, pleasantly tired after a great day.

6th December

Bund Bhareta

In a drought related diversion from the itinerary we headed towards Bund Bhareta. From Bharatpur town the roads got progressively narrower and we entered truly rural India sometimes making slow time as we got stuck behind buffalo carts or negotiated narrow twisting roads through small villages. En route we stopped at a number of spots picking up a few new birds including southern grey shrike and tawny pipit.

Arriving close to the dam end of the reservoir we birded the garden of the Circuit House, which produced a large roost of Indian flying-foxes as well as our first Oriental white-eyes and both brown-headed and coppersmith barbet. From here we walked along through a series of pools to the Nursery which was devoid of birds so we climbed up onto the dam and looked out on a sea of wildfowl, unfortunately we were quickly engulfed by a sea of schoolboys! No sign of a bad monsoon here, the reservoir being reasonably full. From here we managed to see a number of new species, most of which were familiar including pochard, tufted duck, red-crested pochard and great crested grebe. The light was good and we got great views of many species that had been distant at Bharatpur including the terribly smart bar-headed goose and the tiny cotton pygmy-goose.

Dropping off the dam we searched the area around the outflow, the tall grass here revealed a flock of weavers and buntings which included a single streaked weaver, a red-headed bunting and a pair of scarlet rosefinch. Whilst watching this flock we spotted a fantastic sulphur-bellied warbler clinging characteristically to the side of a large tree in the style of a nuthatch. Nearby a splendid blue rock thrush sat atop a building and a booted eagle hung in the air. Lunch time had

crept up on us again so we retired to a shady corner of a field and had yet another great packed lunch courtesy of the chef at The Bagh.

After lunch we walked along the track running near the edge of the reservoir, the dry scrub here produced jungle bush-quail (for the lucky two), white-capped bunting and Indian silverbill. The pools along the track also gave us all a chance to catch up with pied kingfisher. After a short walk we arrived below the derelict hunting lodge and climbed the steps to bird from the grounds. We were greeted warmly by the chowkidar and he offered us all a cup of tea, which we accepted gratefully. Up here it was not difficult to imagine the place in its heyday and try and picture the landscape of 100 years ago before the trees came down and tigers roamed the grounds. Scoping from this vantage point produced a few more familiar new birds for the trip in the shape of osprey and great cormorant. Eventually we headed back to the bus and headed for our last stop of the day the vulture colony at Bayana

The decline of the huge populations of *Gyps* vultures in the sub-Continent is a terrible thing and it was apparent when we arrived at the colony which in the old days (less than ten years ago) would have held well over 200 pairs of birds. Today it has just 32 pairs and this number decreases each year. During the hour we birded the base of the cliffs we saw just 7 Indian vultures. Other birds here included dusky crag martin, common babbler, yellow-eyed babbler and crested bunting. A sobering end to a great day.

En route to dinner Peter out did us all by spotting a jungle cat in the grounds of The Bagh!

7th December

Bharatpur (Koladar area) and Fatepur Sikri

Our last full day in Bharatpur saw us heading eventually into the dry southern reaches of the reserve around Koladar. I write eventually because a UNICEF contingent commandeered the electric bus we had arranged to use!

Instead we checked out the nursery hoping for some thrushes but again failed and then took rickshaws down to Sapan Mori and walked south through an area normally frequented by python and stone curlew we were to fail with both but enjoyed stretching our legs! Pythons were hard to find this winter apparently due to the dry state of the reserve. Ordinarily they are reasonably easy to locate and we must have visited every single known burrow in our search this week. C'est la vie. We continued on foot crossing dry jheels and flushing many paddyfield pipits and a small flock of oriental skylark. Arriving at the temple we discovered that the bus would be available soon so sat down to admire the view and it's many birds to await its arrival.

Once in the bus we were whisked into the Koladar area and spent some time combing dry jheels for lapwings and coursers – we found two northern lapwings and a crested serpent eagle! And then moved onto to search yet more python burrows..... Time for lunch, which was taken back at the Bagh.

After lunch we split into two groups, Phil took most of the crew into Fatepur Sikri and another guided walk with Rajeev, whilst the photographers elected to go with Chris for some unencumbered snapping. The former palace area at Fatepur Sikri was marvelous as usual and the photographers had a pleasant afternoon too. A last minute pre-dusk walk only succeeded in attracting an inordinate number of small boys but we enjoyed the sight of a spotted owlet staring from its earth burrow in a small quarry.

8th December

Bagh area and Ranthambhore (Routes 5 & 6)

This morning we headed straight out into the field to hunt for birds along the nearby canal and in the dry fields adjacent to the Bagh. The canal zone produced a splendid female painted snipe and an assortment of the wetland species that we were all starting to become familiar with. Moving on we walked through a village and searched some dry fields eventually finding a superb pair of yellow-wattled lapwings at close range. An obliging wryneck perched up nearby for all to admire and then it was time to head down to the Maharaja's palace and check out the painted stork roost but we were to be disappointed. The palace looked impressive though – slightly reminiscent of 'Buck House'. And then it was back to the Bagh for breakfast and the paying of bar bills etc before departure.

The bus ran us the short distance to Bharatpur Junction railway station and we waited on the platform of the surprisingly tranquil station for the Golden Temple Express (Amritsar to Bombay!), which was to take us on to Sawai Madhopur and our date with a tiger. The train arrived and we all boarded and got sorted into our seats for the 2.5 hour journey, which passed quickly. Amazingly we added a new mammal to the trip inside the carriage when two house mice scuttled past. We were met at the railway station by Bahadur and driven the short distance to our new home the quirky Castle Joomer Baori, situated on a rise overlooking the plains and backed by the scarp that marks the boundary of the National Park of Ranthambhore. Before a late lunch we had time to add white-browed fantail to the growing list of birds seen on the trip before heading out into the park squeezed into two jeeps.

Neither jeep connected with the stripey chap but we got a great feel for the place and were pleased to get good close views of deer, nilgai and wild boar. The lakes looked fantastic in the evening light, with herds of deer, boar and wildfowl all grazing. A single perched painted stork at last provided us with good views of this normally commonplace (at Bharatpur) bird. Other highlights included our first black-tailed godwit, great tit, Alexandrine parakeet and a pale immature Bonelli's eagle. As the sun fell the jeeps headed out of the park and we headed back to the castle for dinner.

9th December

Ranthambhore (Routes 4, 5 & 6)

We all gathered bright and early for breakfast and got down in good time to get into our jeeps. Plenty of room this time and we all had a guide too. Driving into the park was cold as usual and we all wrapped up warm. Two of the three jeeps searched the park to no effect, picking up a few

new birds and just finding tiger and sloth bear tracks and hearing the occasional alarm call way in the distance. The tension was mounting. But one jeep of four led by Dinesh scored a superb female tiger that performed all sorts of wonderful feats in front of its captivated audience. The rest of us were not green with envy or anything when we got back to the hotel to hear the happy news! Bird highlights from the three jeeps included painted spurfowl, rufous-tailed lark, large cuckooshrike, Spanish sparrow, a tremendous variety of raptors (including steppe eagle) and spotted owl and Indian scops-owl.

Before lunch we had time to be regaled with everyone else's adventures and five Indian vultures appeared over a nearby ridge whilst an Oriental honey buzzard checked out the slope by the hotel. After lunch we had time to relax before going out on our next jeep ride.

Once again one jeep scored, leaving the rest of us in the shade, the same female tiger appearing right at the end of the day on route 4 and seen very well again. Suzanne managed to be in both the successful jeeps, so by the end of the day eight out of eleven of us had seen tiger. Not a bad start to the proceedings. The successful jeep also managed great views of a jungle cat to really rub salt in the wounds. For the rest of us the highlight was probably a splendid covey of fifteen jungle bush-quail that included at least six very small young birds. A short-toed eagle soaring high above the reserve was a welcome addition to the list. At the end of the day we all met up at the pool by the junction and watched at least eight painted sandgrouse come into drink – a great end to a surprisingly tiring day.

10th December Soorwal Lake and Ranthambhore entrance track area

Taking a break from tiger spotting we headed out through Sawai Madhopur to the nearby Soorwal Lake (actually a large reservoir). Those in Phil's jeep enjoyed very close views of a desert cat (exact parentage unknown) in the hotel grounds. Plenty of birds became evident as we neared the site with tight flocks of ruff appearing close overhead and huge V's of black-tailed godwit heading south at altitude. Before we reached the dam we stopped at a roost of Eurasian stone curlews, finally catching up with the bird that had eluded us at Bharatpur.

Climbing down at the start of the dam wall we walked its length picking up some excellent birds amongst the myriad wildfowl and waders available. We were very familiar with many of the new species we encountered, which included avocet, sanderling and common starling. On the drier side of the dam wall there were a number of passerines that gave excellent views including bluethroat, hoopoe, desert wheatear, crested lark, ashy-crowned sparrow-lark and a variety of shrikes. The first great thick-knee also appeared and was greatly admired and we found another sixteen later on near the end of the dam. We also really got to grips with our swallows and martins here with a number of streak-throated swallows and wire-tailed swallows appearing amongst the plain and dusky crag martins.

Arriving at the end of the dam we tucked into some stuffed parathas that really hit the spot and geared us up to walk another one kilometre through the drier areas surrounding the lake. Here

once we had picked our way through the goat flocks we entered really stony arid habitat that produced tawny pipit, more desert wheatear and best of all a flock of seventeen chestnut-bellied sandgrouse. We then drove on heading for the blackbuck area, driving through a variety of small villages where we were greeted warmly especially by the pupils of the many small schools that we passed. As we drove we found some big flocks of greater short-toed larks and a few variable wheatears. Reaching the black buck area we quickly located a splendid male, three females and a young male. The male was spectacular as he proned through the mustard before eventually crossing the railway line and going out of sight. After that it was back to the hotels except for Phil, Chris and Suzanne who headed into Sawai Madhopur for some essential shopping.

After lunch we headed towards the park (seeing two fine male chinkara or Indian gazelle in the hotel grounds) and birded the area between Tiger Moon and the park entrance road. Walking through this area we found a small pool that held a number of avocet and other waders and over which a wide variety of hirundines hawked. Walking to the top of a nearby small hill we flushed a number of painted sandgrouse, which only flew a short distance and allowed us to examine them at leisure in the light of day. As we descended Dinesh drew our attention to a woodpecker tapping in a tree and it proved to be a fine female white-naped woodpecker that gave brief flight views. Moving on we tried to relocate the bird but failed but did get good views of a large cuckooshrike and a tiny brown-capped pygmy-woodpecker. We walked on back to the canter past a small reservoir, which held two pied kingfishers and a confiding common kingfisher. Just as we had settled into the canter the cry went up that the white-naped woodpecker had reappeared in a tree across the valley. Most of us got out to scope this little gem as it called from a dead tree before flying off back round the escarpment.

Last stop of the day was the helipad area that proved rather quiet until we flushed two excellent Indian foxes, that we followed for at least twenty minutes before they eventually doubled back behind us. Meanwhile a new butterfly in the form of a tawny coster was spotted roosting on a twig. At dusk we returned to the hotel for dinner but went for a short night walk in the grounds, which produced jackal, black-naped hare, nilgai and best of all very close views of the spectacular long-tailed tree mouse.

11th December Ranthambhore (Routes 2 & 3)

Back to the jeeps this chilly morning and into the park for more tiger hunting. As we drove out of the hotel grounds we all got great views of the desert cat, allowing us to determine that it had a pretty good case for being a genuine pure-bred individual – a great little cat. In the park all three jeeps blanked on tiger but there were odd moments of excitement. The remains of a carcass attracted three species of vulture including an imperious and dominating Eurasian griffon vulture. Also, amongst the olive-backed pipits, we located a few tree pipits for the first time.

But with tiger still to be found for the first time in my jeep we spent little time looking at birds although we could not ignore the splendid male painted spurfowl at the start of the drive. During the drives we found plenty of fresh tiger pugmarks, following one set for 2 kilometres, and also

the tracks of hyena, sloth bear and leopard. All too soon it was over though and we met up at the base of the steps up to the fort for a quick stuffed paratha before tackling the short climb to the top. We had a quick tour of the site, enjoying the views over the park and the ancient monuments. Eventually we arrived at the Ganesh temple and some of us went in to experience the din and devotion as people came here to pray and be blessed. Then it was back for lunch before heading out once again into the park.

So it was back into the three jeeps for another trip into the park. The tiger-less contingent got real close missing a tigress by just 1-2 minutes. But it was the closest any of us got, as all three jeeps drew a blank. Peter spent a tigerless birthday sadly but we tried to cheer him up in the evening with a cake and some beer. The other two jeeps did route 7 finishing up at a lake at the far end of the driveable circuit, which produced a few waterbirds, and they also got to grips with another white-naped woodpecker. At dusk we headed out of the park and hoped for good fortune for tomorrow, our last day in the park.

12th December

Ranthambhore (Routes 5 & 6)

And so the last full day dawned – would we succeed in seeing tigers, a pressing issue for me as I was one of the four yet to score! We got good routes again so there was every reason to be confident but as we drove around we failed to see anything of a tiger despite the presence of numerous pugmarks indicating a busy night for the tigers. We passed Pankaj and his crew all of whom had yet to see tiger and had just missed one by 1-2 minutes for the second time in two days. Fair to say that morale was dipping at this point. We waved them off went round the next corner and were almost immediately confronted by a huge male tiger, technically a cub it quickly introduced us to the rest of the siblings, another male and a noticeably smaller female. We had struck gold bumping into the ‘Ranthambhore triplets’, aged about 26 months they are still together living within their mother’s territory. We jumped across to a neighbouring jeep whilst our driver and guide tracked down Pankaj and the others. Soon the entire Greentours convoy and its contents were enjoying these three splendid animals as they stretched out on the road or sat nearby and the males engaged in play fighting and long bouts of bored yawning. The resulting group relief was palpable and we all enjoyed the adrenalin rush of spending time in such close proximity to these fantastic animals. Every time you see tigers it is a slightly different experience but this one will be hard to beat. On the way out two of the jeeps also bumped into a splendid basking jungle cat that pretty much ignored us.

At the check-point we split into two groups – one to explore Sawai Madhopur and another to walk the access road out of the park. The shoppers had a great time although Peter’s hopes of grabbing some good urban photos was thwarted by the huge mob curious to see what he was up to. The birders had great views of short-toed eagle, Oriental honey buzzard and found an extra-limital female grey bush-chat (normally in the Himalayan foothills). The small dam halfway along the track had a large collection of birds including a number of common rosetfinch, but best of all was a stunning male Siberian rubythroat that appeared all too briefly. Walking on through a

sea of school boys heading for the Ganesh temple we met up with the jeeps and headed for lunch.

Our last jeep ride failed to live up to the morning one but we enjoyed saying goodbye to the park and we were all still on a high from seeing the tiger cubs. Highlights included an adult Bonelli's eagle. Bidding our guides and drivers farewell and thanking them profusely we headed for dinner on the terrace and some pretty outrageous dancing from various members of the group at the invitation of a Rajasthani folk dance/music/fire-eating group. How we laughed.

13th December Transfer to Jaipur and a tour of the town

After a fairly relaxed lateish breakfast we headed away from the Joomer Baori after a very pleasant stay. The drive to bustling Jaipur took five hours and was punctuated by a couple of birding stops, which proved fruitful. Not only did we find a flooded field packed with birds but we finally found dunlin (!) and four splendid greater flamingos. We also stopped at a roadside restaurant where we tucked into the parathas from the hotel and sampled the local spicy samosas which were great. After tea/coffee and a look at the nearby canal we headed on to Jaipur and lunch at the Clark Amer.

After lunch the group headed into Jaipur to meet TK and looked at the old observatory and the old palace. The highlight of the evening came in the form of a visit to the Dasa Prakash south Indian restaurant in town. The dosas came thick and fast and those tempted by the thali ate on and on and on.....

14th December Jaipur and transfer to Delhi

After a leisurely start we headed straight to the Palace of Winds for a quick photo stop at this glorious building set amongst the hustle and bustle of Jaipur. Then it was on to the Ambar Fort with TK for the elephant ride to the top of the hill and a quick tour of the building. Then it was straight into the Christmas shopping at the Government shop in the fort. Most of us bought something and the pashmina shawls and scarves were a big hit. After forty minutes though we had to head over to the Trident for an excellent buffet lunch before the long drive to Delhi.

The journey to Delhi was uneventful and we arrived at the Centaur and met up with Vinod with enough time to wash and eat a meal at the restaurant before bidding farewell to Gordon and Julia and heading for Old Delhi and our rendezvous with Rahmani and the Kathgodam Express. The train was to take us to the Himalayan foothills and the next leg of our journey.

15th December

Naini Tal area

The train arrived an hour and a half late as usual giving us more time in our bunks before arriving at 0730. Our luggage and minibus had arrived so we climbed aboard and drove the 35 km to Naini Tal. It was obvious from the landscape flashing by that we were in the foothills and had left the plains behind. After breakfast we headed for the snow view along the Kilberry road, the day was clear and bright and we could easily see the 80 miles that fell between us and Nanda Devi (India's second highest peak) and the rest of the Himalayan chain that is visible from here. Afterwards we went for a walk down to the low fields (sadly parts of which are being developed) and bumped into a number of bird flocks, which contained many new birds for the trip. White-tailed nuthatches searched for food on the trunks of trees and delicate buff-barred warblers slipped through the foliage. One of the best birds though and one eagerly anticipated by some was the lammergier and just as we were getting into the minibus to head for lunch Rahmani found one so we all piled out again and watched the bird soaring effortlessly along a distant ridge.

After lunch we headed back to walk the ridge to the proper snow view and had a huge flock of 60 odd black-headed jay and another large flock of white-throated laughingthrushes. We also enjoyed watching the Himalayas turn pink as the sun dipped behind us.

16th December

Sat Tal

Today we headed down towards Sat Tal bright and early. En route we stopped for a small group of Kaleej pheasants, a jungle owlet and a large flock of magnificent red-billed blue magpies. At Sat Tal we walked the entrance road and then cut down to the campsite and did the trail behind it. One of the first birds we saw was a splendid male grey-winged blackbird and nearby a flock containing four species of woodpecker was located. Slaty-headed parakeets flew overhead and further on we found a large flock of 150+ red-breasted parakeets. Large flocks of black bulbuls were also in the area and this confusion of birds made it hard to pick anything out amongst the noise and confusion. We did find a wren-babbler but we chased it around a bit without getting good enough views. A single male green-tailed sunbird added a touch of colour briefly.

Lunch was taken by the lake and afterwards we headed up to the church where we saw a female black-throated sunbird. Next stop was the Upper Fields where we found an enormous number of the striking russet sparrow (75+), in amongst these we spotted white-capped bunting, blue-fronted redstart, black-lored tit, rufous-breasted and black-throated accentor, black-chinned babbler and rusty-cheeked scimitar-babbler. One last stop the other side of Bhowali produced a close lammergier and good views of a male blue-capped redstart. Then it was into town for a quick look around the market and shops before dinner.

17th December

Mongoli Valley, Ramnagar and Quality Inn

Another early start saw us saying goodbye to the Vintage hotel and heading for the Mongoli Valley. We stopped at the waterfall below the Low Fields briefly to search for spotted forktail and we quickly found one of these splendid birds. The Mongoli Valley was very picturesque and provided us with some excellent birds in the form of a female scarlet finch, plenty of laughingthrushes, an aberrant bush warbler and a dapper little ashy-throated warbler. This pleasant walk took us through forested areas, streambanks and through a small hamlet set in a cultivated area. We arrived back at the van in time for lunch and enjoyed yet another good Indian packed lunch.

After lunch we drove an hour and a half to the barrage at Ramnagar where we eventually found at least two wallcreepers searching for food on the concrete structures of the barrage. A quick stop was made in town by those keen to purchase anti-biotics and anti-malarials (for re-stocking first aid kits and for future trips)! Continuing on we stopped at a spot overlooking the river and from which you could see a Pallas's fish-eagle nest – a bird was sitting on it but was rather distant. Arriving at the Quality Inn there was time to have tea and coffee on the lawn before heading out to the river for a quick look around. An American birdwatcher kindly showed us a brown fish-owl at roost and we also had a single brown dipper and another spotted forktail before dusk. Bronzed drongos hawked overhead as we headed back for dinner. A short nightwalk revealed nothing!

18th December

Quality Inn area

Up and at it early again after an impressive breakfast. We spent the morning birding the roadside from the hotel to up behind Mohan. Great road birding this. Stopped at the Forktail stream as dawn broke and Sirdir spotted a fantastic tawny fish-owl as we parked. We got stunning views as it sat on a horizontal branch. The first of many canopy flocks shot through quickly giving us little chance to get on to the many species present but we were to be luckier later on and would tease out several new birds including velvet-fronted nuthatch, bar-winged flycatcher-shrike, scarlet minivet and grey-capped pygmy woodpecker. After this initial stop we intended to drive straight to the road up behind Mohan but we kept seeing or hearing birds and made frequent stops.

One of the first stops was at the Pallas's fish-eagle nest as Chris had spotted that the male was in attendance, he flew as we stopped but we found him in a nearby tree and got great views. As we drove on a male rufous-bellied niltava crossed the road and so out we got again. Whilst watching this we heard a great hornbill in the distance and walked on towards it. We walked into Mohan before locating it in a fruiting tree and caused quite a stir with the locals as we oohed and aaahed over this impressive beast. Also here we had blue-throated barbet and coppersmith barbet. As we drove out of the village we heard yet another hornbill, which was tracked down to a roadside tree – Oriental pied hornbill. Finally we reached the good forest area behind Mohan and walked back down the road. We bumped into a large mixed species flock, which was probably two flocks (one just of woodpeckers and green magpies). This was rather splendid and

we managed to see a number of new birds including fulvous-breasted woodpecker, chestnut-bellied nuthatch, blue-winged minla, whiskered yuhina and gold-spectacled warbler. Further on some of us got a glimpse of a tiny chestnut-headed tesia hopping about in the riverside vegetation. Just before heading back for a big lunch we stopped on the river and although we failed to remedy our ibisbill problem we did get great views of two mountain hawk-eagles and watched them mobbing a steppe eagle that flew low over our heads.

After lunch we loafed on the lawn hoping for raptors but succeeded only in adding another mountain hawk-eagle to the tally. Common jzebels nectared on tall shrubs in the garden and a number of other species were evident including Indian crows. To end the day we headed down to the river and wandered around hoping for ibisbill but finding instead little forktail, grey-breasted prinia, crimson sunbird and ashy bulbul. This evening brown dippers were much more obvious and we found the nest which contained several vociferous young birds that demanded constant feeding [now that reminds me of something...]

After dinner we went for a night drive to find the stream crossing blocked by a lorry with a broken half-shaft we turned around to avoid the chaos with Rahmani at the wheel this was rather more exciting than some of us could deal with but soon we were on our way uphill. We had spotted a barking deer just outside the hotel but little was seen until we stopped at a small stream and had a look at some skittering frogs and a freshwater crab (favourite prey item of the brown fish-owl). On the way back we spotted a large-tailed nightjar resting on a cliff side – but despite Chris' mountaineering efforts we only got poor views from the road.

19th December

Drive into Dhikala and elephant safari

Yet another early start saw us negotiating the broken down lorry and heading straight for the park gates. We arrived just after they opened having seen a party of white-crested laughingthrushes and a chicken with a good claim for being the real deal – a red junglefowl. At the gate shop there was time for one last shopping frenzy before we headed slowly into the park. The journey produced some memorable sightings of a wide variety of beasts – giant catfish and carp swam lazily in the river amongst hordes of smaller fish; not one, but two, long-billed thrushes were spotted; and the gharials loafing on the riverbank or drifting slowly in the current were a firm favourite. Bird flocks contained blue-winged minla and whiskered yuhina. Eventually we came out into the Dhikala clearing but took our time covering the few hundred metres to it as the sky was filled with crested tree-swifts and black vultures soared overhead.

Eventually we were installed in our rooms and headed for a much-needed lunch. Before the elephant ride we had an hour to look out over the floodplain and managed to spot a number of exciting objects. First up was a splendid gang of seven smooth otters (spotted by Peter) that charged overland and leapt into the water nearby before shooting down the rapids and generally sporting about. Out in the grassland a small group of wild elephants ignored their captive counterparts that grazed nearby. Before long we watched the mahouts gathering them in, scrubbing them down in the river and then leading them up to the compound. It was time to go

on elephant safari. Phil and Rahmani elected to go searching for stonechats by jeep and were moderately successful. The elephant gang came back with views of porcupine, several new birds and the satisfaction of having spent an afternoon aboard this most stately form of transport. At last knockings they took to the lookout and spotted another tawny fish-owl and at least two hog deer.

20th December

Transfer to Delhi including the Ganges

Today we made another early start to tackle the long journey that would ultimately take us home to the UK/US. Sardir got us out to the gate again without incident and we made yet another stop at the shop.... Then it was the long drive punctuated by stops at samosa stalls, diversions to sort out road tax payments, a splendid lunch in the most unlikely location and finally a last goodbye to India in the form of a short walk along the Ganges. Here we all searched for the river dolphins but could not find any. We did have a number of good birds to round the trip off though, including a fantastically plumaged black-bellied tern and a dazed and confused grey plover. Then it was back into the bus for the final 3.5 hours into Delhi. Just outside town we were treated to what is one of the avian highlights of the trip for me – the apocalyptic vision of thousands upon thousands of black kites milling around in the smog over the Delhi landfill (more of a mountain than a classic landfill). And so eventually crawling through the Delhi traffic we made it back to the hotel in time for a scrub-up and dinner and a last goodbye to Vinod and Rahmani before getting on our mostly uneventful flights home.